

Clam Lake Elk Herd Update (December 2016)

Population Status: We had an earlier than normal spring this year with green-up 5 May 2016 in the southern part of the elk range and 7 May 2016 in the northern portion. As mentioned in the report regarding the first half of the year, we had a good crop of calves. With the mild winter, early spring and good growing season we expect good calf survival. As with 2015 we had a long Fall, and sightings of elk confirm that adults and young are in very good shape going into winter. We have about 50 elk with working radio collars, having 2 young bulls lose their “break away” collars in November. We have not had a radio collared elk killed by wolves during the second half of the year in the CLEH.

Elk Recruitment and Mortality: Collection of data cards and replacement of batteries on the Clam Lake “Snapshot” camera grid occurred in October and early November. We should have good images during the fall rut and into winter that will give us insights into the make-up of the herd and elk survivorship. Numerous elk sightings have been reported by citizens and resource managers, providing insights into distribution and herd health and numbers. Many of those sightings confirm good survivorship of calves so far. Two calves were killed as a result of vehicle collisions on Highway 77 near Clam Lake this fall, one male and one female.

Elk Research on the Clam Lake Herd: The collaborative effort by WI DNR and the US-Forest Service and the general public to maintain 155 trail cameras on a grid overlaying the elk activity area around Clam Lake is on-going. This year many of the agency maintained cameras were taken over by private citizens. A primary goal of this research is to lay the foundation for an accurate, precise, cost-effective, and sustainable elk monitoring system that will inform many aspects of our management, including elk harvest in the future.

In July, the Wisconsin Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF) Project Advisory Committee approved for funding a number of projects including a research project for \$92,000 to maintain and monitor GPS tracking collars on elk and wolves on both the Black River and Clam Lake elk herds to further investigate population dynamics and predator/prey interactions. This will not only include all the Kentucky elk to be released (up to 75 transported, plus any calves born while in quarantine), but also wolves throughout the two elk ranges and 20 native born elk in the Clam Lake area.

Elk Habitat Improvements: In addition to last year’s creation of 60 acres of forest openings, we planted another 21 acres and mowed 57 acres on the Flambeau River State Forest (FRSF). Telemetry and observations have verified elk use on these managed acres. During 2017, we will continue to spend about \$16,000 of combined Turkey Stamp, National Wild Turkey Federation and RMEF funding. We also have a new mowing and gated trail/opening rejuvenation project which we received over \$15,500 from RMEF to complete. In addition to the Kentucky elk release, CLEH project staff have their hands full with elk and turkey habitat projects (mutually beneficial).

In 2015, timber sales on the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest (CNNF) were set up by DNR and County foresters for the U.S. Forest Service under the cooperative “Good Neighbor Authority” (GNA). Furthermore, the ongoing National Environmental Policy Act review for management on the “Black/Torch Project” should be completed soon, thereby setting the stage for some 6,300 acres of aspen clear cuts to be turned over to the GNA for establishment. This is great news, and trees are again being cut on the CNNF that will be of great value to the elk herd. As a recently published article on elk nutritional ecology clearly establishes, those clear cuts create abundant summer and autumn elk foods!

More Elk Coming: As 2016 come to a close, the new elk quarantine pen and adjoining handling facility on the Flambeau River State Forest (FRSF) is ready to receive elk. CLEH staff will be in Kentucky from January 2nd to approximately February 5th, 2017 to help trap elk. These elk will then be quarantined and health tested in Kentucky for approximately 45 days before being transported to Wisconsin. They will then finish out the remainder of the 120 required quarantine period in the FRSF pen and undergoing additional health tested. Once cleared of all required health tests, they will be fitted with GPS tracking collars and released to the abundant, high quality habitat in that area. The elk restoration team is “charging the reins” to get up to 50 elk, many of which will be pregnant cows, to bring back to the Clam Lake Elk Range! From here on we are hoping for “exponential growth”!

Partnership Efforts: Members of the team going to Kentucky include a diverse group of DNR including a forester from the Flambeau River State Forest, wildlife biologists, wildlife health specialists, and a conservation warden. In addition, outside partners will also participate including a forestry technician from the US Forest Service and a veterinarian from the Department of Agriculture. As already mentioned, the DNR and USFS are cooperating under the Good Neighbor Authority, and this effort should continue to pay big elk habitat dividends into the future. About 40 RMEF volunteers helped place fabric on the FRSF quarantine pen walls during the RMEF Bugle Days work event. Forest Service staff also helped put finishing touches on the quarantine pens. The Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission are also involved in the project, and will be contributing to the purchase of hay and other necessary feed for the elk as well as helping out during health testing.

Information and Education: Josh Spiegel and Laine Stowell participated with other resource managers, loggers and timber mills to give 5th and 6th graders from dozens of schools across Northwestern Wisconsin a “Log a Load for Kids” event in October. Josh and Laine’s site had an elk management focus with bull skulls, an elk hide, photos, radio collars, cow calls and bugles and a presentation to each group. They spread the elk message to over 1,200 kids in those 2 days. Close to 100 participants heard an elk update from elk project staff at the evening September 10th RMEF Bugle Days event.

Future Focus: Beginning in early January, a team of elk trappers from Wisconsin and Kentucky will capture up to 50 Kentucky elk to bring back to the FRSF! After being release next summer, each one wearing a new GPS tracking collar, elk project staff will begin another busy field season creating new, and maintaining established, elk forage habitat as well as monitoring daily activities of the elk herd. There are also plans by the DNR Bureau of Science Services to establish another large “Snapshot Wisconsin” camera grid over-laying the occupied elk area in and around the FRSF release site in the southern portion of the Clam Lake Elk Range.

Laine Stowell, 23 December, 2016—Happy Holidays and Happy New Year